

look at these things—the children, the seniors, the families, whether the economy works, how the education system works, whether we’ve got safe streets, and whether we’re coming together instead of drifting apart—a lot of that work is done at the State level. Joe has already talked about it but, you know, I’m proud to come here because you’re trying to pass a meaningful patients’ protection bill that not only has the right to sue but also has an ombudsman to look over how the managed care system works.

Now, I have a right to say this because I have never condemned managed care, per se. But do you know when I proposed the Patients’ Bill of Rights, 43 managed care companies came to me and said, “Mr. President, we’re interested in these principles. We think they ought to be the law. But you don’t understand; you have got to pass a law, because if we try to do this on our own, we’ll lose our shirt if our competitors undercut us. They’ll take all the healthy people and not charge them anything and leave us with all the problems. There needs to be a law here.”

I’m here because New Jersey’s Democrats are trying to pass child-proof gun legislation, which is very important. I’m here because you believe in progressive, not regressive, taxation—and I know about your fight there—and because of what you’ve done in education. Keep in mind, this only works if there is a partnership.

Now, my Republican predecessors talked a lot about partnerships, but we have eliminated

more regulations on the State—two-thirds of all the Department of Education regulations. We have turned over more programs to the State than my two predecessors combined. But if it’s going to work, you have to have the right people in the State government.

So I ask you, again, think about what you want the new century to look like for your kids and your grandkids. Think about the obligation we have with this chance of a lifetime. Do what you can to stick with us nationally but also at the State level. And if you do what you ought to do in these elections, you will send a loud message to America that we are moving in the right direction for tomorrow.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:30 p.m. in an outdoor tent at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to State Senator Raymond J. Lesniak, dinner host; Mayor J. Christian Bollwage of Elizabeth; Mayor Sharpe James of Newark, NJ; Thomas Giblin, chairman, and Robert C. Janiszewski, Hudson County chairman, Democratic State Committee; State Senator Richard J. Codey; State Assembly members Loretta Weinberg and Joseph V. Doria, Jr., who introduced the President; Jon S. Corzine, former chief executive officer, Goldman Sachs; Vinton G. Cerf, senior vice president of Internet architecture and technology, MCI WorldCom; and Eric Lander, director, Whitehead Institute/MIT Center for Genome Research.

Remarks to the Voices Against Violence Conference

October 19, 1999

Thank you. Good morning. I think Rebecca Hunter did a wonderful job with her pledge and with her introduction, don’t you? Let’s give her another hand. [Applause] I thought she was great.

I would like to begin by thanking our House Democratic leader, Dick Gephardt, and all others who were involved in this Voices Against Violence meeting. I want to thank Congressmen Frost, Bonior, DeLauro, Clement, and Menendez, who are over here to my left. And I see Representative Capps out there. There may be

more Members of Congress here. I thank all of them for being here.

I would like to thank our Secretary of Education, Dick Riley, who came with me; Jeff Bleich, who runs our national grassroots campaign against youth violence. And I’d like to thank Ananda Lewis of MTV and all the other organizations who are working to help make this a safer place for all of you. I thank the parents, the teachers, and the chaperons who came here with you today.

But most of all, I came here to say thank you to all of you for taking responsibility, taking a stand in raising your voices against violence.

I also have to say that this is a good day for me for you to be here because I know a lot of you have been trained in conflict resolution, and I'm meeting with the leaders of the Congress this afternoon, the Republicans and the Democrats, to try to resolve our conflict over the budget. *[Laughter]* And if I don't do so well, I may keep some of you in Washington for an extra day or 2 to help me. I think that would be a good idea.

Actually, we do agree on things from time to time. Later today I'm going to sign legislation that will make good our common commitment to veterans, housing, science and technology, and to a part of what I call my new markets initiative, to give economic opportunity to the poor parts of America where our recovery has not reached.

And now we have to finish the rest of the budget. The most important thing to me and to all of us is that we do a good job on education. It has got to be the number one priority for our country for the new century. We have the largest and most diverse student population we have ever had. It poses new challenges for us, but it gives America an unprecedented opportunity.

So I want you to see what we want to do about youth violence in the larger context of what I believe should be our commitment to give you the best possible education and the best possible future that any children have ever had in the history of our country.

We're trying to put 100,000 teachers in our classrooms for smaller classes. We're trying to build or modernize 6,000 schools, because so many kids are in house trailers and broken-down old schools today, because there are so many more schoolchildren than we've ever had before. We're trying to make sure that by the end of next year we have hooked up every classroom in America to the Internet. We're trying to provide funds for summer school and after-school programs, funds to turn around schools that aren't doing a good job, more efforts to mentor young people in middle school to get them ready to go on to college.

We're also fighting for funds for health care and the environment and for more community police officers. And we're doing it in a way that will enable us to do something else you

should care about, which is to save Social Security and Medicare when the so-called baby boom generation retires, and then there will only be about two people your age working for every one person retired. And it's very important that we use this moment, here, where we're prosperous, to protect your future.

Most of us who are in the baby boom generation are panicked by the thought that when we retire, we'll impose a big burden on your generation and your ability to raise your kids. So we're determined to avoid that, and we can.

And finally, let me say, from the time I was your age until today, our country has always been in debt, and over the last 10 or 12 years, increasingly so, before I became President. We've got a chance to get this country out of debt over the next 15 years, to make America debt-free for the first time since 1835, and I hope we will do that.

I've been asking all the American people, including our young people, to imagine the future and to recognize that our country has a certain, unique moment here, when we've got a lot of prosperity and when our problems have been laid bare for us for all to see by tragic instances, like the instance at Columbine. But it's not the only kind of violence young people are subjected to. They're also subjected to hate crimes: Matthew Shepard being killed in Wyoming; the children shot at, at the Jewish community center; and then the Filipino postalworker murdered; the young Korean killed in the Middle West by the guy on the hate crime spree who also killed the African-American former basketball coach at Northwestern.

So when you have all these opportunities out there and you have your problems laid bare and you have the strength of the country and the prosperity of the country giving us the confidence to deal with them, what I hope you will say to everybody here and when you go back home is, America will never have a better time to face its biggest problems; America will never have a better time to save all of its children. And that is what I think we ought to be thinking about.

You heard Congressman Gephardt say that our crime rate has been going down 7 years in a row. That's the first time that's happened for over 40 years. The overall crime rate is the lowest it has been in 26 years. The murder rate is the lowest it has been in more than 30 years. That sounds great, and I'm proud of

that. And I'm glad we've worked on that. But does anybody think America is as safe as it ought to be? No. Of course not, obviously.

Six months after Columbine—tomorrow, 6 months after Columbine, no serious person believes that America is as safe as it ought to be. And every day, every day we lose more than a dozen kids to violence. They die in ones and twos, so we don't see them on the evening news; we don't see their names blared in headlines.

So why don't you help us adopt a real goal? Why don't we, together, say that we're going to make America the safest big country in the world in the 21st century, starting with making our children safe? You can do that, and that's what I want to do.

We need an organized way in every community in America to capture the spirit that brought you to Washington this week. We need people working on specific things. I thought Rebecca Hunter's pledge was great. You just think about it. If every young person in every high school and junior high school in America took the pledge that she stated and acted on it, violence would go down. At least violence perpetrated by young people would go down.

I want you to help us while you're here. What else can we do? How do we make our schools sanctuaries of safety? How do we recognize the early warning signs of violence? How do we teach people to resolve their differences peacefully? How do we share good ideas from one community to another? How can people who are injured find it in their hearts to forgive people they've been angry at, instead of trying to get even? These are very important questions.

It seems to me there is no quick-fix solution, and what we have to do in Washington is to try to give you the tools and the framework and as safe as possible condition to do this work. But our young people have to be reached one by one. In many ways, all of you can have more influence on your peers than I can as President, or than any of us can. We can try, but you can make all the difference.

I also would like to say that I think that this conference has to recognize that there are things that you can do and things that we have to do and that we have some obligations here to understand the problem of youth violence in the environment as a greater violent level of our community. And let me just mention a few things. Mr. Gephardt mentioned a couple

of them before, but when I took office, almost 7 years ago now, I had spent a lot of time going from community to community, walking the streets with police officers and with community leaders, sitting and listening to young people talk about the violence in their streets. I'll never forget, I was in California one time—this was way—8 or 9 years ago—and this young person in a grade school told me what it was like when they had a drive-by shooting at random and all the kids had to get out of their desks and hit the floor. And I've listened to people talk to me about this stuff.

And I asked the Congress to do what the local people told me would help to lower crime. So we put more community policing programs out there; we passed the Brady bill; we banned assault weapons. We did a lot of things that were good, and we supported local community initiatives. We had a zero tolerance for guns in school policy.

And as I said, it is working, and that is good. But now I think we have to do some more things. I also should say that all these people here in our caucus who supported all those crime policies took a lot of heat for doing it, because we were told that—the NRA told everybody we were going to take their guns away and they couldn't go hunting anymore. Well, everybody's still hunting, but it's a safer country, and we're still having the same argument up here.

We held the first-ever school safety conference at the White House, and we gave over \$100 million in safe school grants to schools and communities to help them fight youth violence. We started mentoring programs to help kids know that if they stayed in school and stayed out of trouble, they could actually go on to college. And after the terrible wave of violence culminating in Columbine, I launched a new White House youth violence council to coordinate our work throughout all the Government agencies.

Now, today we are going to release at the Government level—this makes the very point I made to you in the beginning about why I'm glad you're here—today we're going to release our second annual report on school safety. The Secretary of Education has done wonderful work on this. It shows that, once again, the vast majority of our schools are safe. It also shows they're getting safer, which is a tribute to you

and to your teachers. Homicides in schools remain rare. Crimes are down both in and out of school, and there are now far fewer students carrying weapons to schools than there were 6 years ago. That's the good news.

The bad news is we've had Columbine, Jonesboro, Springfield, Pearl—I could go on and on—all the places where there have been these horrible examples of school violence. We know that more and more students feel unsafe. So I want to say to you that—again I say, I want you to help us with new ideas. But I want to tell you what we're doing now, up here. And then I want to close and ask you to think about something for the rest of the time you're here.

First of all, we want to do more to help you reach other people. Our Justice Department and the Education Department worked with MTV to provide a youth action guide and a CD that focused on concrete steps to reduce youth violence, such as mentoring, conflict resolution, and youth advocacy. I want to thank the Recording Industry Association of America for their help in putting this CD together. We've already distributed over a quarter of a million, over 250,000 of these CD's. Today the Justice Department is going to send out 200,000 more to organizations around the country: after-school programs, law enforcement agencies, foundations, and civic groups.

Now, this CD basically sounds a call for action. It's a commonsense tool that helps to make a difference if it's put in the right hands, the hands of people like you. And we're doing our part. But let me also say, to again echo what Mr. Gephardt said, we need Congress to help us. Especially, we need Congress to help us to keep guns out of the wrong hands.

Now, I've heard all this talk with—people say it doesn't really matter whether we do anything about guns. All I know is, we passed the Brady bill. We've kept 400,000 people with criminal backgrounds from buying handguns since 1994, and we have the lowest crime rate in 26 years. I don't believe the things are unrelated.

And one of the real problems with the Brady bill is there is a loophole: If you buy a gun at a gun show or in urban flea markets, they don't have to do a background check on you. So we want to close that. We also want to ban the import of large ammunition clips. And we want to require child-safety locks.

Let me just give you this statistic to think about. You want to be against unintentional vio-

lence as well as intentional violence. The accidental death rate of children from guns in America—the accidental death rate—listen to this—is 9 times higher than the rates for the next 25 biggest industrial countries combined. You take the next 25 biggest economies and put them all together, our accidental death rate from guns is 9 times higher than all of them put together.

So we should do more to create an environment in which we will be more safe, that will help you when you're trying to get kids to sign the pledge, when you're trying to solve the conflicts in your schools. I also believe it's very important for Congress to pass this hate crimes legislation which makes it explicitly criminal to attack people because of their racial, their religious, or their sexual orientation. I think it is very, very important.

Now, last night the Republicans on the relevant committees removed important hate crimes protection from a bill that had already passed the Senate. And they tried to kill this bill when we weren't watching, but now we're watching this morning. I want to ask you also to speak up for that, and that's the last point I want to make.

This hate crimes legislation is important because—why? It embodies what I think is the biggest challenge facing not only our society but societies all over the world. The great thing about the modern world is we've got a lot of movement across national borders. A lot of you have probably been on the Internet talking to people in other countries. And when I look ahead to your future, I see a time when we'll have these unbelievable scientific discoveries. And your children, literally, may be born with a life expectancy of about 100 years. We're unlocking the secrets of the human gene. And you will be, literally, able to not only be American citizens but citizens of the world in ways that no one else has ever been, even if you don't travel beyond your home county, because of the way the Internet is working to bring us together. That's the good news.

The bad news is that the same demons that lead people to commit racial and religious and sexual orientation-related crimes and discrimination in America are sweeping the world in more violent ways. Basically, the conflict in Northern Ireland is a religious conflict. The conflict in the Middle East is an ethnic and religious conflict. The conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia were

ethnic and religious conflicts. The brutal killings in Africa were tribal conflicts. All over the world, people are getting into modern technology, but they're behaving as if they lived 1,000 or 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, because they're afraid of people who are different from them still.

Don't you think that's interesting, that you live in the most modern of all worlds, and yet the biggest problem we've got is the oldest problem of human society, people being scared of people who are different from them? And you can help that.

I had, last week, at the White House—really my wife had this meeting, and I just went along for the ride. But she sponsored this lecture by a man who helped to create the infrastructure of the Internet and a man who knows more than nearly anybody in America about the human genome project, the breaking down of the component parts of the genes, and how it fits in the body. And they talked about how we were going to be able to solve all these health problems by merging computer technology and what we know about genetics.

But let me tell you what the genome specialist said. He said—now listen to this—look around this room, all the different kinds of people that are in this room. He said that 99 percent of us, 99.9 percent of each of our bodies is identical to the other. We are 99.9 percent the same genetically. Even more interesting, he said, if you take two ethnic groups, there are more differences in the gene structures within the ethnic groups than there are between the ethnic groups. That is, if you take, let's say, a group of Hispanic kids and a group of Asian kids, there will be more differences within the group than what you average out what the genetic makeup is between the Hispanics and the Asians.

We're getting a message here. Science is reaffirming what our values tell us. And I'm telling you, if you all can do something about violence and fear and the compulsive alienation of so many of our young people, which turns into their need to look down on people and eventually dehumanize them and eventually think it's okay to act violently against them, if you can deal with that—it's the oldest problem of human society—if you can deal with that, you're going to have the brightest future of any generation of Americans.

You will have a chance to solve diseases, to solve poverty problems, to give people potential that they never would have had before. But the whole thing can be held down by the failure to deal with our violent impulses, which are the product of our most deep-seated fears. So think about that.

If you want to live in the new world of the 21st century, you've got to help people get rid of their old hatreds and old fears. We'll do our part, and we're very proud of your leadership in doing yours.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 a.m. in the Cannon Caucus Room at the Cannon House Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Rebecca Hunter, a student from Nashville, TN, who introduced the President; Jeffrey Bleich, Executive Director, National Campaign Against Youth Violence; Ananda Lewis, host of MTV's "HotZONE;" Vinton G. Cerf, senior vice president for Internet architecture and technology, MCI WorldCom; and Eric Lander, director, Whitehead Institute/MIT Center for Genome Research. The conference, entitled Voices Against Violence: A Congressional Teen Conference, was sponsored by House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt and the House Democratic caucus.

Statement on the Social Security Administration Cost-of-Living Adjustment *October 19, 1999*

Today the Social Security Administration announced the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for next year's benefits. This announcement is a reminder that, for over 60 years, Social Security has been a cornerstone of American national

policy that has enabled generations of Americans to retire with dignity. Each year millions of disabled and elderly Americans are lifted out of poverty by Social Security. As a result, poverty rates among the elderly are at the lowest level